

Editorial: interventions and boundaries in Learning Development spaces

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This edition of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education brings together five papers, five case studies and three opinion pieces whose themes and contents span many of the broad territories covered by our work. The notion of territories, or spaces for learning development, their dimensions – cultural, physical, analogue and digital - and the scope for action within them, has particular relevance at this time. The accelerating changes in the world of higher education, in the UK and globally, present many challenges but also many crossovers and nodes. As Gráinne Conole points out in her opinion piece, ‘*Connectivity*’, networks offer the potential for powerful positive interventions by learning developers, students and academics working to promote learning in a global, connected environment.

When Cowan took on the role of tutor with English major students alongside Chiu in Taiwan they explored the potential for virtual encounters in developing student critical thinking strategies (*‘Public feedback - but personal feedforward?’*). Chiu’s face-to-face modelling of good practice was supplemented by Cowan’s asynchronous online discussions. Looking at the socio-cultural and cognitive implications of their work they argue that sensitive public and private modes of feedback and feed-forward as developed

in a Confucian Heritage Cultural context would also be applicable to the 'west'. The students recognised the value of the discussion mechanisms utilised in developing their critical thinking processes: *'The most important and precious thing we learned on this online forum is not learning how to outstrip our rivals but learning how to think logically and organise our ideas well'*.

The case study by Peter Samuels, Mary Deane and Jeanne Griffin describes another use for online peer-communication; this arose from a one-day training event on writing for publication, provided for doctoral students in science education. The approach taken sees writing as a social process and describes attempts to create a writing community, enhancing the workshop with opportunities for online feedback and review from peers.

Hogg and Doig discuss the problems and possibilities of using their university VLE, Moodle, to develop engaging blended learning for students. They wanted to overcome the potential for isolation inherent in online learning and to foster dialogic and engaging encounters whilst creating a community-learning environment that replicated to some extent the physical campus. Their paper (*'Engaging Blended Learning Students: An evolving approach to engaging students through the VLE'*) demonstrates the use of the Moodle book format, with narrative and checklists to aid student navigation, use and understanding, plus the use of video introductions and video tutorials. This format generated very positive feedback from students and improved retention rates on distance learning courses.

In *'Plagiarism and attribution: an academic literacies approach?'* Magyar challenges the reader to consider the academic writing practice of attribution through the experiences and perceptions of international students. The study presents a thought-provoking piece that discusses the differences in approach to linguistic manipulation and subsequent developments of virtual resources that seek to develop students' confidence in the application of UK academic practice.

Karen Fitzgibbon and Jacqueline Harrett (*'Telling Tales: Students' Learning Stories'*) provide useful insight into the affective dimension of learning. Their research explores the use of personal learning narratives as a way of promoting empathy and providing a more supportive and less anonymous learning environment. Also relevant to the affective

dimension of learning and how the negotiation of boundaries and roles affects academic work is Emily Danvers' case study (*'Dissertation Question Time: Supporting the Dissertation Project through Peer Advice'*). She explores some of the issues facing learning developers when supporting students undertaking dissertations and independent projects, in particular the potential overlap or conflict with the role of the dissertation supervisor. Her innovative 'Question Time' format offers an informal arena for collaborative support from peers, academic staff and learning developers. 'Dissertation Question Time' explores a creative and dialogic way of providing informal and peer-informed guidance to students undertaking the individual research project or dissertation that complemented support provided by faculty modules and supervisors.

Anne Hill, Simon Spencer and Nicola Bartholomew (*'TMI - Too Much Information: Creating Employability Skills Resources'*) remind us again how the domain of higher education is intersected by the demands to develop an 'employability' as well as a graduate identity. They describe the outcome of a project aiming to create 'future-proof' graduates. Through discussion with staff, students and employers they argue for the importance of communicating in a clear, concise and relevant way in the workplace, avoiding the trap of providing TMI. The result is a scenario-based online resource that highlights characteristics of communication in a professional environment. Similarly, Ian Turner and Liz Day describe how they encouraged Bioscience students to develop their understanding of 'employability' skills (*'Engaging Biological Sciences Students in the Development of Employability Skills through Creative Teaching and Peer Reviewed Action Plans'*). The personal action plans relate to specific Bioscience standards. STEM students sometimes report discomfort with conventional models of reflective practice, but a key element here was the incorporation of anonymised online peer critique of draft action plans to help students engage more deeply with the standards and enhance their own development.

Jamie Cleland and Geoff Walton's paper provides further powerful evidence for the value of online environments in encouraging freer and fuller peer feedback than is usually possible in face to face settings. *'Online peer assessment: helping to facilitate learning through participation'* describes a structured and iterative framework of tasks for an undergraduate research and study skills module. The authors report that this had long-term benefits for their students' learning.

Both Turner and Day and Cleland and Walton's initiatives were embedded within specific course contexts and used to complement face to face learning. In contrast, Michael Goldrick and James O'Higgins-Norman's paper, *'Reducing academic isolation in favour of learning relationships through a virtual classroom'*, shows how the virtual classroom helped reduce academic isolation for off-campus and distance students, by offering them opportunities to communicate synchronously with peers and teachers. Along with structured tasks and presentations, the authors also used what they describe as 'game show' elements such as voting systems and audio applause to engender a sense of fun and increase engagement.

Staying with the theme of fun, Yvon Appleby and Alison Barton offer a case study entitled: *'Engaging conceptual learning about threshold concepts with pots and pans'*. They see Meyer and Land's notion of 'threshold concept' as itself a threshold concept for the topic area of curriculum design with their MEd students. Their novel way of getting this across via a practical session with pots and pans teases out the concept of heat transfer in cooking. Initial student reactions ranged from curiosity to confusion and scepticism but later written reflections showed significant application of threshold concepts in their own practice. At first sight, this article has little in common with Gavin Fairbairn's discussion of two tactics which have been criticised by some colleagues but which he uses with students to help them develop as learners: offering feedback in a group setting, and working *with* students on their written texts. In *'Supporting students as learners: two questions concerning pedagogic practice'*, he justifies both tactics in terms of their impact on the students' development and the positive consequences of these different collaborative activities. However; both articles, like so many in the current edition of JLDHE share fundamental concerns about the impact of our interventions on students and the boundaries of our professional role. These are issues which need further debate across the ALDinHE community. For example, how far do or should we reveal our own uncertainties to students in the process of developing their independence and confidence?

This review of the contents of JLDHE 4 indicates that the field of practice we call Learning Development has increasingly to negotiate issues related to learning spaces and learning identities. Our 2012 ALDinHE conference theme, "Learning Development in a digital age: emerging literacies and learning spaces", also signals the coming together of issues related to communication, technologies and the identities of those who use them. Along

with notions of identity we find considerations that are key to learning: 'literacy' for example, arises from participation and from having negotiated rights and responsibilities in a particular context. For students in general this relates to what they can do and say in the higher education context; and what is valued and rewarded in the behaviours of both students and staff. In virtual learning environments, for example, students often have little control, which tends to work against Inquiry and Problem-Based approaches to learning. For learning developers the exploration of the what, why and how of successful 'blends' of face-to-face and online teaching and learning is often hampered by being under-resourced and frequently by being marginalised in academic structures.

Alongside such questions we might ask what a successful online university would look like. When designing digital teaching and learning experiences, learning developers should, as far as possible, work to 'design-in' the social conditions for excellent online and enabling learning experiences. These exemplify both the values and the practicalities that make for accessibility, collaboration and participation in higher education for all who can benefit from it. Faced with increased student numbers and reduced resources, it is tempting to see online environments simply as a more or less adequate replacement for face-to-face teaching. The papers in this edition of JLDHE show how both asynchronous and synchronous online activities can offer very distinctive advantages for students. Their ability to give and receive peer feedback can be positively enhanced by the extra time to reflect and (where appropriate) make use of the anonymity that online discussions can offer. Similarly, the chance to replay and review online sessions may encourage them to assume more control and responsibility for their learning. For both subject-based lecturers and learning developers, these new modes of engagement offer challenges as well as opportunities: not just the technical challenge of grappling with unfamiliar software and techniques, but the pedagogical and cultural challenges of adapting our existing expertise and developing new approaches to help us make full use of the multiple discourses and multiple starting points generated by online learning. As we move towards more virtual teaching and learning environments and activities, now is the time to raise again the question of what a 'real' university is, what constitutes a successful and enabling university experience and, for us, what role learning developers can play in keeping that vision alive. Our collective professional experience of working across disciplines, of networking across institutions and of promoting the students viewpoint puts us in a good position to support

the “*rhizomatic ... horizontal, evolving, networked and intelligent*” learning possibilities Conole refers to.

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